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Michael Stammers, **Figureheads & Ship Carvings**, Annapolis , Maryland : Naval Institute Press, 2005. 120pp., illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index.

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Treated as separate structural entities, and often overshadowed by the vessels which house them, ships carvings, and figureheads have remained, in various forms, through the evolution of maritime history. With little focus usually paid to such elaborate architectural pieces, it is refreshing to see Michael Stammers analysis of artifacts from creation to their present condition in *Figureheads & Ship Carving*. Stammers attempts to provide a well-informed examination of the role figureheads and carvings play in history via photographs and illustrations. While discussing the reasoning behind such intricate pieces, and the emotional connection communities or individuals place on these artifacts.

Divided chronologically into ten chapters, *Figureheads & Ship Carving* is a catalogue discussing the widespread evolution of smaller floating craft from simple boats with paddles to large-scale warships and merchant vessels, focusing on the period from the sixteenth century to the present with a brief section on the lives of carvers, and surviving figureheads. The book presents a general historical view of the social and economic attitudes affecting carvings and figureheads.

The original motivation behind early vessel decoration is unclear, but Stammers provides an anthropological perspective, by discussing how religious symbolism plays a role in the prehistoric adornment of watercraft with animal and human skulls. The advancement of ships technology shaped the world of figureheads from superstitious creations to more realistic and modern icons. Illustrating how these figures, seen as a type

of “ships mascot,” have translated into modern society as fashionable additions to any vessel (p. 7).

The sixteenth century marked a turning point in the evolution of carvings and figureheads. A more scientific approach to design and manufacture emerged where carvers created rules for the replication of ships and figureheads, such as using scale models and repeated patterns. Vessels began to expand to carry greater quantities of cargo and individuals. The eighteenth and nineteenth century ushered in a strict adherence to classical rules, with a move from the use of wood to iron in vessel construction and by eighteen seventy steam had taken over.

Throughout the nineteenth century, advancing technology and common social trends influenced and furthered the evolution of ship carving and figureheads. In the end money was the main factor in determining a vessels overall décor. Despite the advancements during the nineteenth century from sailing ships to steam, figureheads remained a vital component in vessel manufacture.

The latter portion of *Figureheads & Ship Carving* offers an insight into the mentality associated with salvaging figureheads and provides a brief glimpse into the lives of carvers. Stammers points out that the majority of modern figureheads appear detached from their original vessels and are now located in buildings, naval dockyards, individual’s private collections, and museums.

From the beginning the author states the parameters under which this book was written and his personal bias. He focuses mainly on the British figureheads, with a fair number from the collection at the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool , England where he functioned as Keeper for several years. Stammers analyzes in some detail the carvings from the aforementioned collection, which he regards as typical representations of their period and believes that broad trends in figurehead fashion reached beyond national borders. Despite this belief Stammers only refers to, but does not illustrate, some of the more recognized types of figureheads and carvings, which derived from a

European and North American practice, dating to the late nineteenth-century. A more comprehensive piece of literature would emerge with the inclusion of a wider variety of countries.

The majority of photographs appear in black and white, causing a loss of value and significance when referring to the figureheads and carvings. Color images would better illustrate the authors point and aide in the readers understanding of these magnificent pieces of history. This point is especially noteworthy when Stammers discusses color contrasts among figureheads and carvings.

Throughout the book, there is a focus on the intricacies surrounding vessel categories and construction. This level of detail might distract the reader from the underlying message of each chapter and information could be lost on individuals unfamiliar with the concepts Stammers explores. As a whole however, *Figureheads & Ship Carving* expands the breath of information concerning its topic without overpowering the reader.

The general format of the book is easy to follow and supplies a generous number of photographs which aide in the comprehension of the artifacts discussed. Comparisons between depictions and illustrations of vessels and their designs over time, point out the additional categories of figureheads beyond warship figureheads. Despite the fact, they constitute the majority, which remain today. Often overlooked by others, Stammers makes a conscious effort to focus at least somewhat on stern carvings. Considering no comprehensive survey of figureheads and museums collections exists. *Figureheads & Ship Carving* proves a valuable and informative resource in the scheme of maritime literature.



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